

# DIGITAL PLATFORMS & ACCESSING FACTS DURING COVID-19

*During a crisis moment, access to accurate, reliable, and verified information can save lives. In 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic was announced by the World Health Organization, humanity was surrounded by an immense amount of news sources thanks to tech-companies and digital platforms. With the increase in news, however, access to factual information has also become a challenge. Uninformed experts' non-factual statements in the media and failure to boost social trust in measures in the early days of the pandemic has led to a complete disregard of precautions by some. This article reveals the tools, technologies, and methods made available by global social media companies and digital platforms during this period, while drawing attention to transparency in information dissemination and media literacy.*

Gürkan Özturan\*



TPQ

Fall 2020

\* Gürkan Özturan is a Journalist and the Executive Manager of dokuz8NEWS.

**I**n the past decade, major events have been reverberating through digital platforms with an increasing density. After each major earthquake, flood, tsunami, or disaster, such as miners stranded underground or a nuclear meltdown, millions of internet users flood digital platforms to primarily seek help, inform their loved ones about their well-being, express themselves, declare their opinion, and form digital communities to discuss the ongoing developments further. The deadly and infectious coronavirus pandemic has shown a similar pattern in terms of people’s access to digital platforms. As I have personally been closely monitoring the situation in Turkey since the first case was confirmed on 11 March 2020, this article will focus on Turkey while looking at the measures and steps taken by global digital platforms during this period.

While digital habits have revealed a pattern in terms of users’ coping mechanisms, conventional platforms remain to be a significant source of information. Reuters Institute’s Digital News Report 2020 has focused on the impact of coronavirus this year. The report reveals that despite the widespread use of online sources for accessing and receiving crucial information, television as a conventional platform remains to be the most popular source of news. Print newspapers also still have widespread circulation despite all the troubles the media is facing. In fact, overall trust in the news in Turkey has increased by nine percent in the past year.<sup>1</sup>

Considering that “post-truth” was Oxford Dictionary’s “word of the year” in 2016,<sup>2</sup> the significance of creating objective information sources in times of a crisis like a pandemic, which cannot be overcome with any other method than a scientific approach, becomes more apparent.

### *Sources of Disinformation & Conspiracy Theories*

As the conventional media remains to be the most popular source of information in Turkey, in the early days of the pandemic many people turned to the screens, only to see “TV health experts”, such as oncologist Dr. Yavuz Dizdar, advising viewers that “coronavirus is not a real pandemic, but a pharmaceutical plot to sell more drugs,” or cardiologist Dr. Canan Karatay, suggesting viewers have sheep’s head and feet soup to boost the immune system, or Dr. Oytun Erbaş, claiming that “COVID-19 would not infect our lands because Turkish gene is more resistant to it, so the situation would not be like in other countries.”<sup>3</sup> Such statements became some

<sup>1</sup> Nic Newman et al., “Digital News Report,” 2020th ed. (Oxford, UK: University of Oxford, 2020), p. 85.

<sup>2</sup> “‘Post-truth’ declared word of the year by Oxford Dictionaries,” *BBC*, 16 November 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-37995600>

<sup>3</sup> Mehmet Kaban. “Koronavirüs ve Bekleyen Tehlike | Canan Karatay & Yavuz Dizdar & Oytun Erbaş [Coronavirus and the Waiting Danger | Canan Karatay & Yavuz Dizdar & Oytun Erbaş],” YouTube Video, 4:42, 29 March 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AVIb7JyEdJU>

of the most popular topics in the early days of the pandemic in Turkey, and misled millions of people to underestimate the deadly virus. The misinformation aired on conventional media also quickly boosted the spread of disinformation, especially the ones revolving around the 5G towers and Bill Gates. Some of the conspiracy theories even found reflections among celebrities such as Lee Ryan, Woody Harrelson, and Amanda Holden, which later contributed to multiple attacks against 5G towers in the United Kingdom.<sup>4</sup>

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*“Not all applications of the Turkish government were as sympathetic toward non-mainstream groups as Minister Koca’s approach toward critical media.”*

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In his 2015 TED Talk, Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates had drawn attention to a deadly virus in the following decades as a global catastrophe risk, stating that humanity excessively invested in pre-empting a nuclear war but not enough to prevent the next epidemic.<sup>5</sup> This warning and his misquoted video from 2018 “Does saving more lives lead to overpopulation?”<sup>6</sup> led to Bill Gates being vilified. In multiple countries throughout March and April, it was possible to read that Bill Gates was sponsoring 5G technology for global mind and population control, and the potential vaccine would contain nano-bots to enable him to do so. Bill Gates refuted the outrageous claims in multiple interviews, announcing that humanity should be prepared better health wise and help countries that cannot develop vaccines by themselves.<sup>7</sup>

### ***Governments’ Approach to Pandemic Management***

The Turkish government has presented an appearance of absolute control over the situation since the beginning of the pandemic. The Minister of Health organized daily press conferences, informing the members of the media—and surprisingly, the critical independent media was not omitted from these daily events. This openness to critical media was well received in society and quickly made the Minister of

<sup>4</sup> James Temperton, “The 5G coronavirus conspiracy theory just took a really dark turn,” *Wired*, 7 May 2020, <https://www.wired.co.uk/article/5g-coronavirus-conspiracy-theory-attacks>

<sup>5</sup> TED, “The next outbreak? We’re not ready | Bill Gates” YouTube Video, 8:37, 3 April 2015, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Af6b\\_wyiwl](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Af6b_wyiwl)

<sup>6</sup> Bill Gates, “Does saving more lives lead to overpopulation?” YouTube Video, 2:05, 13 February 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=obRG-2jurz0>

<sup>7</sup> CGTN, “Bill Gates responds to vaccine conspiracy theories on CCTV,” YouTube Video, 1:25, 10 April 2020, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nFUdX\\_0PpT0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nFUdX_0PpT0)

Health Fahrettin Koca the most popular political figure in the country, passing even President Erdoğan.<sup>8</sup>

During the opening of Oslo Metropolitan University's event focusing on access to information titled, "A right to know - How can we ensure reliable information in times of crisis?", Norwegian Minister of Foreign Affairs Ine Eriksen Søreide evaluated governments' response to the pandemic:

Without access to reliable information you cannot make informed decisions... in Norway and most other European/Scandinavian countries we have a large degree of openness and you are obliged to deliver documents in many other countries you are not; that is to be able to keep authorities accountable. That is very crucial for access to information that enables you to access other rights; freedom of speech, freedom of assembly. We see increasingly in many countries that they are tightening the grip on these basic rights using the pandemic as an excuse, but in real terms they are hindering access to reliable information. [...] To call this situation an 'infodemic' is not an exaggeration. It is really dangerous when false health advice spreads around, when groups of minorities are subject to prosecution because they are claimed to spread the virus. It is also very dangerous when you do not have access to reliable information on what to do and what not to do. When you combine that with for example with the theory of not using the vaccine it becomes very dangerous. For people to trust vaccines, you have to provide not only reliable but also timely information so that people can make informed choices. [...] In Nordic countries there is trust between people and the authorities; that is one of our strongest weapons against the pandemic. Information that comes from the health authorities is widely regarded as truthful and informative and necessary. That kind of trust is the most important when we are dealing with a pandemic when we depend on having people follow health advice. Otherwise people might just say 'we do not care' and that is very dangerous.<sup>9</sup>

The Norwegian minister's words outlined the successful communication between a government and citizens for fast recovery from the impact of the pandemic. Openness and a rights-focused approach could be seen in countries such as Norway; however, this was not the case in all, leading to a disregard for announced measures in some societies.

<sup>8</sup> "Konsensus Araştırma: Fahrettin Koca'nın siyasi performansı, Erdoğan'inkinden daha çok beğeniliyor [Konsensus Polling: Fahrettin Koca's political performance is received better than Erdoğan's]" *T24*, 2 May 2020, <https://t24.com.tr/haber/konsensus-arastirma-fahrettin-koca-nin-siyasi-performansi-erdogan-inkinden-daha-cok-begeniliyor.876243>

<sup>9</sup> OsloMet, "A right to know - How can we ensure reliable information in times of crisis?" YouTube Video, 1:48:05, 1 October 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2qEixQghvWU>

*Asymmetric Measures and Targeting Distrust & Disregard in Society*

However, not all applications of the Turkish government were as sympathetic toward non-mainstream groups as Minister Koca's approach toward critical media. One of the earliest measures taken in Turkey against the pandemic, only days after the confirmation of the first case, was to close down venues that serve alcohol while keeping other businesses, non-alcoholic cafes, and restaurants open.<sup>10</sup> After months of lockdown measures, when restrictions started to be lifted, alcohol-serving businesses were one of the last to be opened,<sup>11</sup> causing distress in society and creating the perception that alcohol-consumers—which make up less than 10 percent of society in Turkey—are responsible for the outbreak. During his Friday sermon on the first Friday of the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, Director of Religious Affairs, Dr. Ali Erbaş said, “Islam considers adultery as the biggest sin. It damnates the people of Lut, homosexuality. What does it bring to humanity except for diseases and destruction? Let's unite and fight against all kinds of evil together.”<sup>12</sup> This statement was later used as a pretext in society to target LGBTI+ communities as the cause of the pandemic.

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According to a poll conducted by NG Polling in April 2020, 98 percent of the respondents stated that they had enough information on the virus, while 96 percent added they were taking protective measures and complying with the restrictions.<sup>13</sup> After months of asymmetric restrictions and business-focused measures implemented

<sup>10</sup> Cankat Taşdan, “Koronavirüs nedeniyle gece eğlence mekanlarının faaliyetleri durdurulacak [Night-time entertainment venues will be closed due to coronavirus],” *Anadolu Agency*, 15 March 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/koronavirus/koronavirus-nedeniyle-gece-eglence-mekanlarinin-faaliyetleri-durdurulacak/1767137>

<sup>11</sup> Can Bursalı, “Kafeler, restoranlar açılıyor ancak alkollü mekanlarda kısıtlama sürüyor... İşletmeciler ne diyor? [Cafes, restaurants are opening up, but restrictions continue in alcohol serving venues... What do managers say?],” *Independent Turkish*, 29 May 2020, <https://indyturk.com/node/187326/haber/kafeler-restoranlar-aciliyor-ancak-alkollu-mekanalarda-kisiltlama-suruyor>

<sup>12</sup> “Prof. Erbaş'ın eşcinsellikle mücadele çağrısına suç duyurusu [Criminal complaint against Prof. Erbaş's statements on fight against homosexuality],” *TV5*, 26 April 2020, <https://www.tv5.com.tr/haber/1945/prof-erbasin-escinsel-likle-mucadele-cagrisina-suc-duyurusu.html>

<sup>13</sup> “Anket: Koronavirüs Türkiye'yi nasıl etkiledi? {Poll: How did coronavirus impact Turkey?},” *Atlas*, 4 May 2020, <https://www.atlasdergisi.com/gundem/koronavirus-turkiyeyi-nasil-etkiledi-koronavirus-ne-zaman-kontrol-altina-alinir.html>

by the government, in another poll conducted in September by Avrasya Polling, 11 percent declared that they no longer believe there is a virus, and 33 percent stated that the impact of the virus was being exaggerated, while 40 percent accused people of not being cautious enough in complaint of non-compliance with the measures.<sup>14</sup> In the same poll, 70.5 percent of metropolitan residents announced their distrust toward the Ministry of Health's data on COVID-19, as a result of the government's non-transparent approach to pandemic communication.<sup>15</sup>

### ***Opaque Process Management & Suspicion Over Announced Data***

The Turkish Medical Association (TMA), which consists of medical professionals who are at the forefront of the pandemic and report data on COVID-19 cases, has been skeptical of the announced data from the early periods of the pandemic in Turkey. After TMA's criticism of the announced numbers, opposition-held municipalities started announcing the number of funerals taking place in their cities.<sup>16</sup> On 29 September 2020, a Laboratories Information Management System report that recorded 157,975 test results and 29,377 positive cases nationwide for 10 September aired on FOX TV. The Ministry of Health on the same day had announced only 1,512 new cases after 107,702 tests, revealing the discrepancy in announced numbers.<sup>17</sup> The next day, Minister Koca announced that the numbers that he shared daily at the press conferences omitted the positive cases that did not show critical symptoms, and said, "We made a distinction between the positive cases and the sick, our state has taken into consideration the national interests as much as the people's health during the pandemic," confessing the manipulation of data, and creating an even further level of distrust toward the process among society.<sup>18</sup>

The decline in people's adherence to measures and disregard for restrictions can be considered within the light of the government's asymmetric approach to the COVID-19 process and manipulated opaque data, which lowered trust as well as

<sup>14</sup> "Koronavirüs anketi: Halkın yüzde 11'i inanmıyor, yüzde 33'ü abartıldığını düşünüyor [Coronavirus poll: 11% do not believe, 33% think it is exaggerated]," *dokuz8HABER*, 16 September 2020, <https://dokuz8haber.net/gundem/koronavirus-anketi-halkin-yuzde-11-i-inanmiyor-yuzde-33u-abartildigini-dusunuyor/>

<sup>15</sup> "Koronavirüs anketi: Halkın yüzde 11'i inanmıyor, yüzde 33'ü abartıldığını düşünüyor [Coronavirus poll: 11% do not believe, 33% think it is exaggerated]," *dokuz8HABER*, 16 September 2020, <https://dokuz8haber.net/gundem/koronavirus-anketi-halkin-yuzde-11-i-inanmiyor-yuzde-33u-abartildigini-dusunuyor/>

<sup>16</sup> "İstanbul'da Mart-Nisan ayında geçen yıla göre 3600 daha fazla ölüm yaşanmış [3600 more deaths in Istanbul during March-April months compared to last year]," *dokuz8HABER*, 2 May 2020, <https://dokuz8haber.net/gundem/gecen-yila-gore-mart-nisan-ayinda-istanbulda-3600-daha-fazla-olum-yasanmis/>

<sup>17</sup> "Şoke eden belgeyle Bakan Koca'ya seslendi: Gerçekleri söylemenin vakti geldi [Calling on Minister Koca with shocking document: Time to tell the truth]," *Te1el*, 29 September 2020, <https://te1el.com.tr/soke-eden-belgeyle-bakan-kocaya-seslendi-gercekleri-soylemenin-vakti-geldi-233448/>

<sup>18</sup> Faruk Bildirici, "Bakan Koca'ya iki ay sonra itiraf ettiren gazeteciliğe selam [Greetings to the journalism that made Minister Koca confess after two months]," *Faruk Bildirici-Medyâ Ombudsmanı*, 2 October 2020, <https://farukbildirici.com/blog/detay/Bakan-Koca-ya-iki-ay-sonra-itiraf-ettiren-gazetecilige-selam>

the “necessity” for increased restrictions to prevent further outbreaks. The TMA has repeatedly been calling on the authorities to be more transparent and take proactive measures to prevent the worsening of the situation, yet to no avail.

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*“Offering credible information to netizens is only half the challenge.”*

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### ***Turkish Government’s Digital Measures***

Listed as one of the “not-free” countries in Freedom House’s Freedom on the Net Report,<sup>19</sup> Turkey has taken multiple steps to digitize the coronavirus management process. Education moved to online platforms, and a mobile application was developed to monitor and track citizens’ movements, inform them, and allow them to request information on the pandemic. Furthermore, a COVID-19 information portal has been created on the Ministry of Health’s website that shares the latest information in Turkish and English—yet failing to reach parts of society that speak neither language. Fortunately, despite the government’s lack of diversity in its COVID-19 communication, there were multiple sources available online when it came to transmitting crucial information to people around the world.

### ***Infodemic: Digital Platforms & Combating Misinformation***

Google is the first platform that millions of people check in times of crises to see the latest developments or find solutions to their problems. The platform enables emergency services in moments of urgency and the COVID-19 process was no exception to this. According to Google Trends results, the number of searches concerning coronavirus increased by 260 percent throughout February 2020, eventually reaching a peak between 15-21 March.<sup>20</sup>

In early March, Google CEO Sundar Pichai published a blog post on Google’s contributions to the COVID-19 pandemic process. In the early days of the pandemic, Google leaders started meeting on a daily basis, and the platform initiated an incident response team to stay in sync with the WHO.<sup>21</sup> Mr. Pichai also announced the

<sup>19</sup> Freedom House, “Freedom on the Net 2019,” 4 November 2019, [https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2019-1/11042019\\_Report\\_FH\\_FOTN\\_2019\\_final\\_Public\\_Download.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2019-1/11042019_Report_FH_FOTN_2019_final_Public_Download.pdf)

<sup>20</sup> “Data Source: Google Trends,” *Google Trends*, 10 October 2020, <https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?q=coronavirus>

<sup>21</sup> Sundar Pichai, “Coronavirus: How we’re helping,” *The Keyword Google*, 6 March 2020, <https://blog.google/in-side-google/company-announcements/coronavirus-covid19-response/>

platform would expand Knowledge Panels on Google as well as direct users to channels led by the WHO or other relevant authoritative organizations on YouTube.<sup>22</sup>

Another step taken by Google was through the Trust and Safety team, which has been working to protect users from misinformation—a crucial element in the struggle against the deadly virus. While it was possible to see well-intentioned informative content available on online platforms, there were also phishing attempts, conspiracy theorists, and malware and misinformation creators on these platforms.<sup>23</sup> Google’s Trust and Safety team acted quickly in removing any content that encouraged non-medical treatment of the coronavirus, while Google Ads blocked ad-revenues for pages that contained misinformation to prevent capitalizing on the deadly virus.<sup>24</sup> Google’s content policies have also been strictly prohibiting applications that feature medical or health-related content that are misleading or potentially harmful.<sup>25</sup> One other initiative Google introduced during the pandemic was the Global Case Mapper for local journalists to share up to date visualizations of the pandemic from anywhere in the world to create a global journalistic mapping of the virus.<sup>26</sup>

### *Social Media’s Response to the Pandemic*

On 17 March, various digital platforms including Twitter, Facebook, Google, YouTube, LinkedIn, Microsoft, and Reddit made a joint declaration that they would be working closely together in COVID-19 response efforts to combat fraud and misinformation concerning the virus, and to promote accurate and reliable content on their platforms.<sup>27</sup>

#### *Facebook’s Response to COVID-19*

Since 2014, Facebook has been developing a feature called “Safety Check” which offers users urgent information in times of an incident where people might be in danger, such as an earthquake, hurricane, or mass shooting. During a prolonged crisis, however, the platform had to develop a more permanent tool to keep users informed and prevent an “infodemic” as a result of misinformation and fake news.

While fake news and misinformation have a harmful influence on communities,

<sup>22</sup> Pichai, “How we’re helping.”

<sup>23</sup> Pichai, “How we’re helping.”

<sup>24</sup> Pichai, “How we’re helping.”

<sup>25</sup> “Play Console: Policy Center,” *Google*, 10 October 2020, [https://support.google.com/googleplay/android-developer/answer/9888077#!?zippy\\_activeEl=misleading-claims#misleading-claims](https://support.google.com/googleplay/android-developer/answer/9888077#!?zippy_activeEl=misleading-claims#misleading-claims)

<sup>26</sup> Simon Rogers, “A new global COVID-19 map for journalist,” *Google News Lab*, 10 August 2020, <https://blog.google/outreach-initiatives/google-news-initiative/new-global-covid-19-map-journalists/>

<sup>27</sup> Twitter Communications (@Twittercomms), Twitter Post, 17 March 2020, <https://twitter.com/TwitterComms/status/1239712022096297985>

they also turn the world into a more closed environment in terms of accessing accurate information and weakening trust. Facebook has been supporting the global public health community’s work to keep people safe and informed during the coronavirus public health crisis, and to keep harmful misinformation about COVID-19 from spreading on its platforms.

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*“As trust in the government and media drops, and reliable and transparent information becomes increasingly unavailable, the tendency to believe in conspiracy theories increases.”*

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One example of providing access to accurate information is the launch of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) Information Center, featured at the top of News Feed, to provide a central place for users to access the latest news and information, as well as resources and tips to stay healthy and support their families and communities.<sup>28</sup> The center includes real-time updates from national health authorities and global organizations such as the WHO, in addition to helpful articles, videos, and posts about social distancing and preventing the spread of COVID-19.<sup>29</sup>

Offering credible information to netizens is only half the challenge. Since stopping the spread of misinformation and harmful content about COVID-19 is equally important, Facebook has been working with 60 fact-checking organizations that review and rate content in more than 50 languages around the world, including with two partners in Turkey, during this period.<sup>30</sup> In order to combat the impact of misinformation in the time of a deadly pandemic, and to further support the work of its fact-checking partners during this time, Facebook launched a one million dollar grant program in partnership with the International Fact-Checking Network.<sup>31</sup>

In addition to the COVID-19 Information Center, Facebook has also been sharing direct information with its hundreds of millions of users on Facebook and Instagram, and has initiated the WHO Health Alert on WhatsApp.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, Facebook is also engaged in combatting hoaxes and misinformation. Since 2018, the company has

<sup>28</sup> Nick Clegg, “Combating COVID-19 Misinformation Across Our Apps,” *Facebook Newsroom*, 25 March 2020, <https://about.fb.com/news/2020/03/combating-covid-19-misinformation/>

<sup>29</sup> Clegg, “COVID-19 Misinformation.”

<sup>30</sup> Clegg, “COVID-19 Misinformation.”

<sup>31</sup> Clegg, “COVID-19 Misinformation.”

<sup>32</sup> Clegg, “COVID-19 Misinformation.”

actively been fighting against misinformation, and so far has established partnerships with 55 fact-checking networks operating in 45 languages globally.<sup>33</sup> Having previously limited the number of message forwarding on WhatsApp in one time, during the pandemic, Facebook started to also consider introducing a limitation on forwarding on its Messenger service to prevent the spread of misinformation.<sup>34</sup> One crucial action Facebook took during this process has also been to warn its users when they come across non-factual content. As a result of strong partnerships with fact-checking networks, users were notified and hundreds of thousands of misinformation were removed.<sup>35</sup>

### *Twitter's Response to COVID-19*

As one of the most interactive platforms, Twitter has also taken comprehensive steps to prevent the spreading of misinformation, and offer users tools to access reliable information during the pandemic. Twitter published a specific page on the pandemic in March, and has been updating it with relevant information about the company's new initiatives on its official blog.

The social media platform states that they had been monitoring the agenda prior to the peak in global interest in the coronavirus. In January 2020, Twitter had already initiated a COVID-19 search prompt to allow users to reach credible, authoritative content at the top of search results—including when users misspelled the virus or pandemic—and established direct links to the WHO and local health organizations in 70 countries around the world.<sup>36</sup> As millions of users turn to Twitter to follow the latest developments on a daily basis, the platform introduced a permanent COVID-19 tab as part of its “explore” feature, created a COVID-19 event page, and introduced #KnowTheFacts search prompt through direct cooperation with relevant organizations working to contain the pandemic threat.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, the platform also declared the assessment process of potentially misleading information after updating its terms and broadening the guidance on unverified claims, which now has a broader definition of harmful content.<sup>38</sup> In addition, the social media platform also took proactive measures to increase public engagement in the process through partnering with relevant organizations and actively supporting/initiating events such

<sup>33</sup> Clegg, “COVID-19 Misinformation.”

<sup>34</sup> Clegg, “COVID-19 Misinformation.”

<sup>35</sup> Guy Rosen, “An Update on Our Work to Keep People Informed and Limit Misinformation About COVID-19,” *Facebook Newsroom*, 16 April 2020, <https://about.fb.com/news/2020/04/covid-19-misinfo-update/>

<sup>36</sup> Twitter Inc., “Global expansion of the COVID-19 search prompt,” *Twitter Blog*, 4 March 2020, [https://blog.twitter.com/en\\_us/topics/company/2020/covid-19.html#search](https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2020/covid-19.html#search)

<sup>37</sup> Twitter Inc., “Launch of a new dedicated #KnowTheFacts search prompt,” *Twitter Blog*, 29 January 2020, [https://blog.twitter.com/en\\_us/topics/company/2020/covid-19.html#knowthefacts](https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2020/covid-19.html#knowthefacts)

<sup>38</sup> Twitter Inc., “Protecting the public conversation,” *Twitter Blog*, 2 April 2020, [https://blog.twitter.com/en\\_us/topics/company/2020/covid-19.html#protecting](https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2020/covid-19.html#protecting)

as World Health Day and a COVID-19 hackathon, clapping healthcare workers, holding Q&A sessions with government officials, as well as promoting protective measures and donation matching.<sup>39</sup>

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*“Considering governments might deliberately or inadvertently share misleading information, it is important for digital platforms to establish further collaborations with civil society and independent media organizations.”*

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Similar to other platforms, Twitter also allocated funds for journalistic work to protect human rights and ensure much-needed contributions from the media during the pandemic.<sup>40</sup> Concerning misleading information, Twitter also announced that they will continue removing false or potentially misleading content that might be harmful and could hinder the containment of the pandemic, as well as statements based on unverified claims that might cause widespread panic or social unrest.<sup>41</sup> By 1 April, Twitter Safety announced that 1,100 tweets containing misleading and potentially harmful content were already removed, and its automated systems had challenged more than 1.5 million accounts while targeting manipulative discussions around the pandemic.<sup>42</sup> The platform’s content moderation algorithm has been updated to target statements that<sup>43</sup>

- deliberately advise people to disregard protective measures concerning COVID-19
- promote misleading claims about ineffective methods as cures or treatment of the virus
- deny established scientific facts concerning the virus’ incubation period or transmission guidance
- spread false or misleading information that could allow readers to reach a conclusion about having COVID-19 or not

<sup>39</sup> Twitter Inc., “Partnering with organizations and public engagement,” *Twitter Blog*, 10 April 2020, [https://blog.twitter.com/en\\_us/topics/company/2020/covid-19.html#partnering](https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2020/covid-19.html#partnering)

<sup>40</sup> Twitter for Good (@TwitterForGood), Twitter Post, 24 March 2020, <https://twitter.com/TwitterForGood/status/1242498525830799362>

<sup>41</sup> Twitter Safety (@TwitterSafety), Twitter Post, 22 April 2020, <https://twitter.com/TwitterSafety/status/1253044659175034880>

<sup>42</sup> Twitter Safety (@TwitterSafety), Twitter Post, 1 April 2020, <https://twitter.com/TwitterSafety/status/1245415840440143873>

<sup>43</sup> Twitter Inc., “An update on our content moderation work,” *Twitter Blog*, 27 March 2020, [https://blog.twitter.com/en\\_us/topics/company/2020/covid-19.html#moderation](https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2020/covid-19.html#moderation)

- impersonate government or health officials or organizations
- make harmful claims or baseless non-scientific statements

### *Impact of an Infodemic*

Despite digital platforms taking all kinds of measures against misinformation, disinformation, and fake news, these notions remain to be a major threat to people, endangering their lives. Dr. Çiğdem Bozdağ of Media & Journalism Center in Groningen/Netherlands states that people become more prone to misinformation in countries where social polarization is higher.<sup>44</sup> As trust in the government and media drops, and reliable and transparent information becomes increasingly unavailable, the tendency to believe in conspiracy theories increases.

On another scale, coronavirus has presented a new ground for political action through disinformation. After the 2016 claims of Russian involvement in the US elections through the spread of fake news, this time, ahead of the 2020 presidential election, English content concerning COVID-19 has been claimed to be spread by Russia to disrupt the process and exploit the crisis ahead of the election.<sup>45</sup> These claims later led tech companies to label state-sponsored media organizations on their platforms.<sup>46</sup>

During the pandemic, people have started using digital platforms more often and for prolonged periods; this means they have been subjected to more information flow, creating a sense of permanent threat and confusion.<sup>47</sup> Psychiatrist Dr. Koray Başar is quoted in Laura Kunzendorf's article saying, "Individuals should feel that they have control over the situation which they are threatened by. This sense of control could be constructed with the help of scientific, clear, and practical information."<sup>48</sup> The impact of an infodemic on society can not only threaten people's lives, but for survivors, also leave a trace of mass trauma.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Defne Altrok, "Uzmanlardan WhatsApp'ta sahte korona haberi uyarısı [Experts warn against fake corona news on WhatsApp]," *Deutsche Welle*, 11 April 2020, <https://www.dw.com/tr/uzmanlardan-whatstapta-sahte-korona-haberi-uyarisi/a-53080301>

<sup>45</sup> Associated Press, "Russia used English-language sites to spread Covid-19 disinformation, US officials say," *Guardian*, 29 July 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/jul/28/russia-covid-19-disinformation-web-sites-us-intelligence>

<sup>46</sup> Courtney C. Radsch, "Tech platforms struggle to label state-controlled media," *CPJ*, 12 August 2020, <https://cpi.org/2020/08/tech-platforms-struggle-to-label-state-controlled-media/>

<sup>47</sup> Laura Kunzendorf, "Stress, Anxiety, Depression: Does the coronavirus pandemic leave a 'mass trauma'?" *dokuz8NEWS*, 10 October 2020, <https://dokuz8haber.net/english/life-society/stress-anxiety-depression-does-the-coronavirus-pandemic-leave-a-mass-trauma/>

<sup>48</sup> Kunzendorf, "Stress, Anxiety, Depression."

<sup>49</sup> Kunzendorf, "Stress, Anxiety, Depression."

## ***Conclusion***

During prolonged periods of crises, such as lockdown during the coronavirus pandemic, the human psychological condition and “content fatigue” must be taken into consideration while planning and executing dissemination of information.

In terms of society’s inclination to believe in misinformation, authorities should be doing all they can to ensure social trust and compliance with measures. However, considering governments might deliberately or inadvertently share misleading information, it is important for digital platforms to establish further collaborations with civil society and independent media organizations. At the end of the day, digital platforms and corporations should not be held accountable for combating misinformation, however, it must be kept in mind that they are part of the process, and they should continue to deepen their collaborations with fact-checkers. In this regard, in addition to investing in fact-checking networks and creating mechanisms to remove non-factual information, supporting initiatives to increase the level of media literacy in society is also a necessity.